

*Pindar*. Ancients in Action. By ANNE PIPPIN BURNETT. London: Bristol Classical Press, 2008. Pp. 175. Paper, \$23.00. ISBN 978-185-399711-2.

Anne Pippin Burnett's *Pindar* is part of the series "Ancients in Action" from Bristol University Press, whose goal, according to the Press' statement, is to "introduce(s) major figures of the ancient world to the modern general reader, including the essentials of each subject's life, works, and significance for later western civilization." This book does not fulfill these goals, and indeed Pindar resists such a neat summing up. Instead, B. has produced a general description of epinician poetry, followed by copious translation and commentary, which is much closer to what a "modern general reader" needs.

In Chapter 1, "Praise for a Victorious Athlete," B. offers a description of the epinician poem remarkable for the variety of views of Pindar included. She follows Bundy by stating that the essential task is to recite the name of the victor, his significant relatives and the locations where he or his relatives won this and other prizes. But B. departs from the formalists when she attempts to recreate the occasion of the poems, following Carne-Ross and asserting that the second task was to evoke the divine quality that attends athletic victory and is enlarged by the use of myth to include the entire community. The discussion of Pindar's myth takes up a third of this chapter and is covertly stressed through the choice of passages to translate in the chapters that follow. What is missing is reference to Pindar's style, which is for many the main reason he continues to be read. B. approaches this topic through her translation, which—despite a tendency to simplify and generalize Pindar's language—is the strongest part of the book. The chapters that follow consist largely of summary, translation and commentary. The commentary is problematic, raising large issues in such a brief and simple form that it is often confusing.

The songs for young men are the topic of Chapter 2, and B. centers her account on Pythian 10, Nemeans 7, 3 and 8, and Isthmians 6 and 8 (in that order). B. (who has written a book on this topic) [[1]] finds a few themes peculiar to these songs, the main ones being the trainers, female divinities and personal beauty. B. translates all of Pythian 10, and in her commentary she suggests that the central myth, Perseus visiting the Hyperboreans, is linked to the present occasion, in that both scenes are festive. This is one example of B.'s attempts in the commentary to relate the myths to the honorees of the poems, and in this case the link is consistent with Chapter 1: myth expands on the religious feeling that attends athletic victory. The remark that

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this myth is “a parallel world” (p. 45) also hearkens back to that chapter. B. occasionally oversimplifies in her commentary, an example being her claim that the account of Achilles in Isthmian 8 is a “supremely positive definition of mortality” (p. 58). B. ends this chapter by translating most of Nemean 8, presumably because it includes the story of Odysseus’ slander of Ajax and Ajax’s suicide, although B. does not herself say as much.

Chapter 3 is titled “Celebrations for Men” and treats Pythian 9, Olympians 9 and 7, Isthmian 1 and Olympian 6. Olympian 7 is translated in its entirety, with occasional breaks for explanatory notes. In these notes B. adopts a view not found in her first chapter. She observes in her commentary that Telemachus’ arrival in Rhodes, Zeus’ gift of Rhodes to Helios, and the Rhodians’ flawed sacrifice to Helios all involve mistakes, which is an uncontroversial remark; but she then explains that this long poem about “mortal error and weakness” is designed to draw envy away from the famous athlete being honored, Diagoras of Rhodes. The reasoning behind this view is unclear. Not all the mistakes are mortal, and no evidence is offered for the existence of any envy or the need to deflect it. B. assumes that the poems have a political function, which contradicts her explanation of the role of myth in Chapter 1.

The main part of Chapter 4, “Celebrations for Rulers,” is devoted to translations of ten poems: Olympians 3 and 2; Pythian 6; Olympian 1; Pythians 1, 2 and 3; Nemean 1; and Pythians 5 and 4. This chapter is nearly as long as Chapters 2 and 3 combined, and is the heart of the book. These poems include direct and indirect references to contemporary events, and B. again assumes that they have an instrumental purpose. Here, for instance, is her comment on Olympian 1’s story of Tantalus: “To the courtiers gathered at the table ... the ode says this: (if you try to share in Hieron’s glory) ... your punishment will be, like that of Tantalus, painful and never-ending” (p. 125). B. makes a similar suggestion about the myth of Ixion in Pythian 2: “the listeners ... would understand ... any attempt to disturb the settled order of things would bring a perpetual bondage” (p. 132). B.’s extremely simple historical reading can be read as evidence against such an approach. On the other hand, her comments on imagery are often interesting when she is not treating the poems as mere political documents. For instance, when B. translates all of Olympian 3 with her usual clarity and energy, in her commentary she sees a parallel between Heracles bringing the olive tree to Olympia and Theron bringing the olive crown to Acragas. B. translates over half of Olympian 2, including lines 53–100 (the end), because of the poem’s

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unique account of the afterlife. This is one case where she explains her choice of passages.

B. ends Chapter 4 with an account of Pythian 4, of which she translates only 102 of 299 lines, but her treatment of the poem, a mix of translation, summary and commentary, extends over 12 pages of text. There is a good story to be told here, and B. tells it well. At the end of the account, she translates the poet's direct appeal to Arkesilas (278 ff.), and her verse vividly describes the life the young exile longs to live in his homeland (292-7):

“...With his  
cup of misfortune now drained, he prays that he may some-  
time see  
home once again, frequently drinking with friends at the well  
of Apollo,  
heart given over to pleasures of youth, or in tranquility  
raising his elegant lyre among citizen singers, offering  
pain to no man, himself without grief.”

These anapestic lines, a meter B. often uses, give the English verse some feel of the original aeolic and dactylo-epitritic meters. A key test of a translation is how it reads, and these translations pass that test.

A book of this sort must deliver a sense of the author to a “general reader” approaching Greek literature through translation. B.’s chapter on epinician offers a fair representation of scholarly thinking about Pindar, whereas the commentary that follows is overly condensed and frequently at odds with the general chapter. The quality of the translations, however, will determine whether the modern reader is able to connect with the ancient author. Although these translations sometimes fail to convey Pindar’s admittedly difficult style, they remain the strongest part of this book.

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[[1]] *Pindar’s songs for young athletes of Aigina*. (Oxford and New York, 2005).